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SUBJECT: BULGARIA NAMES POPULAR, PRO-U.S. MINISTER AS EU  
COMMISSIONER

Classified By: Ambassador John Beyrle for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: The government on October 26 nominated European Affairs Minister Meglena Kuneva to serve as Bulgaria's first EU Commissioner. EC President Jose Manuel Barroso welcomed the nomination and assigned Kuneva the consumer protection portfolio. One of Bulgaria's most respected political figures, Kuneva is widely credited for her efforts to push forward and finalize the difficult negotiations for Bulgaria's timely EU accession. A U.S.-trained lawyer and strong Atlanticist, Kuneva is the only member of ex-PM Simeon Saxe-Coburg Gotha's cabinet to retain her post in the current Socialist-led government. Socialist PM Sergei Stanishev named her despite strong pressure from his party to choose a BSP stalwart for the post. Largely seen as Brussels's favored choice for a Bulgarian nominee, Kuneva is expected to be easily approved by the European Parliament later this year. She will reportedly take UK Ambassador to Bulgaria Jeremy Hill to Brussels as her chef du cabinet. END SUMMARY

#### RESPECTED POLITICAL FIGURE

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12. (C) Soft-spoken and media-friendly, Kuneva, 49, has been one of the country's most popular political figures since she joined politics in 2001 as a member of ex-PM Simeon Saxe-Coburg's party. A lawyer and former university lecturer, Kuneva has led Bulgaria's EU entry talks since August 2001, when she was appointed Deputy Foreign Minister and Chief Negotiator with the EU. She became Bulgaria's first European Affairs Minister in May 2002 when the government upgraded the chief negotiator's position. More technocrat than politician, Kuneva was not considered a political heavy weight. Defying early expectations, she built national consensus regarding the EU, promoting public awareness of EU accession and pushing EU-related reforms. Politicians across the spectrum acknowledge her expertise in European affairs and her success in finalizing Bulgaria's negotiations with the EU six months ahead of schedule.

13. (SBU) Given Kuneva's popularity and non-political background, it was no surprise when she became the only minister from Simeon's cabinet to retain her post when the Socialist-led government of PM Stanishev took over in August 12005. Kuneva enjoys an untainted reputation for high integrity and over the past five years has regularly ranked among the government ministers with highest approval ratings. Kuneva clearly is equally well-respected in Brussels, where she is widely perceived as Bulgaria's European face. Some critics at home, however, have said that in order to please her EC colleagues, she has acted sometimes as Brussels' representative to Sofia, rather than the other way around.

#### POLITICAL HURDLES AT HOME

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¶4. (C) Despite her popularity, Kuneva's nomination was not an easy decision for PM Stanishev, who had been under strong pressure from his Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) to name a Socialist candidate for the key post. An influential Socialist group, led by Foreign Minister Ivailo Kalfin, openly objected to Kuneva's nomination, lobbying for Sofia's Ambassador to Paris Irina Bokova instead. A respected career diplomat but with little direct EU-related experience, Bokova is the sister of Philip Bokov, PM's Stanishev's chief of staff. After months of horse trading among coalition partners, Stanishev opted against his party's will and endorsed Kuneva, a decision which insiders say was aimed to secure the loyalty of Simeon's party as a coalition partner and please Brussels, whose support Kuneva enjoys. In a discussion with the Ambassador several weeks ago, an exhausted Kuneva was uncertain of her future and probed for U.S. support of her candidacy. The pendulum swung back in her favor, we suspect, as the Prime Minister looked at the larger strategic picture.

#### WARM WELCOME IN BRUSSELS

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¶5. (C) EC President Jose Manuel Barroso welcomed Kuneva's nomination and said she would be assigned the consumer protection portfolio, which previously fell within the purview of EU Public Health Commissioner Markos Kyprianou. "I am convinced that Ms Kuneva has the professional and political qualities, as well as the personal commitment and necessary experience to accomplish all the tasks which I am proposing to make her responsible for," said Barroso. Kuneva, along with Romania's nominee, will face hearings next month before the European Parliament, which will vote on their nominations at a December 11-15 plenary session.

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Kuneva was appointed as a counselor to the EC, a move aimed to ease the transition by increasing cooperation between the commissioner-nominees and the EC and EP. The EU DCM here (protect) told us that the Bulgarians had played their cards exceedingly well, landing a weighty portfolio.

#### IMPRESSIVE CV

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¶6. (U) Kuneva was born on June 22, 1957 in Sofia. She earned a Master's degree in law from the Sofia University St Kliment Ohridski in 1981, and was awarded a PhD in Law in ¶1984. She specialized in Human Rights Law at the Human Rights Institute, Turku, Finland, in 1993, and Environmental Law at Oxford, UK, in 1996. In 1999-2000, Kuneva specialized in law at Georgetown University. Kuneva served as assistant professor of Civil Law at Sofia University from 1988 to 1989, and as a lecturer at the Free University of Burgas and the New Bulgarian University, 1992-1994. She worked as a legal advisor at the Council of Ministers' Legal Department from 1991 until 2001, during which period she participated in the drafting of a series of Bulgarian laws on environment, access to information, etc. In June 2001, Kuneva was elected MP on the ticket of the National Movement for Simeon II. She was appointed Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and Chief Negotiator with the EU in August 2001. In May 2002, Kuneva was appointed Minister of European Affairs, and a representative of the Bulgarian government at the Convention for the Future of Europe. Kuneva is fluent in English, French, and Russian. She is married to a respected financier and has a son.

¶7. (C) COMMENT: The nomination of Kuneva as Sofia's European Commissioner is a smart move by the Bulgarian government which will smooth Bulgaria's start-up year. Although resisted by the BSP rank-and-file, Kuneva's nomination is not expected to undermine PM Stanishev's leadership or cause major tremors in his ruling party. By endorsing Kuneva, the PM has maintained balance in the ruling three-party coalition and either paid-off or earned a debt from ex-King Simeon's party. Kuneva's "can do" spirit and deep affinity for

Americans and the U.S. (she gets misty-eyed recalling her "fantastic" years at Georgetown) will win us at least one ally on the Commission. Her rumored chef du cabinet, UK Ambassador Jeremy Hill, is well and favorably known in Sofia.

If Hill does go, Brussels can expect a smart and collegial interlocutor who knows the EU from his previous posting there as a Counselor for Legal, Justice and Home Affairs. END

COMMENT

BEYRLE